

Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project

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1996-1997 Season

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Good results from Merawah work mark main focus of spring season

Being published again after a somewhat lengthy silence, this issue of the ADIAS *Occasional Newsletter* has a substantial amount to report to sponsors of activities since earlier this year, covering the majority of the work undertaken this season.

On following pages, details of the work undertaken on the island of Balghelam, for the second season in succession, is covered, but for our lead item, it is appropriate to provide some information about the main thrust of this spring's work, on the island of Merawah.

Although our original plans had involved a further season of work on Sir Bani Yas, it was decided in late February that it was time we turned our attention once again to Merawah, where ADIAS team members were kindly provided with facilities by our Patron, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

During the first ADIAS season in 1992, a preliminary survey of Merawah identified an important site from the Late Stone Age, around six or seven thousand years ago, on a rocky headland at the south western corner of the island. The site, where computer-aided mapping was also undertaken in 1995, has yielded over 100 fine flint tools, mainly projectile points (arrowheads for the uninitiated), which suggested that the area had been used as a hunting camp.

The survey also identified a number of possible stone structures, adding to the importance of the site, perhaps one of the most significant Late Stone Age sites ever found in the Emirates.

Under the direction of ADIAS Director Dr. Geoffrey King, this year's work concentrated on a further study of the Late Stone Age site. A detailed plotting and mapping of the structures, quite possibly amongst the earliest evidence of settlement in

the UAE, showed in excess of 40 structures to exist, which were plotted in co-ordination with the lithics (stone tools) and pottery identified on the site in earlier seasons..

To complement the information gathered, a number of the larger structures were drawn in detail, in advance of possible future excavation.

A few hundred metres away from the Late Stone Age settlement site, excavation of a cairn was undertaken by an Australian team headed by Jodie Benton of the University of Sydney, who has previously excavated at Tell Abraq, Al Sufouh, in Dubai, and Jebel Emalah, in Sharjah. Although nothing was recovered to provide any immediate indication of dating, it is possible that the cairn dates to a period similar to that of the settlement site, while a further detailed study of the area, building upon initial survey work carried out in 1992, indicated that there are at least a dozen other cairns nearby.

Two other structures of a similar type were also identified during a short survey on the adjacent island of Liffiyah, also surveyed in 1992 and 1994.

Elsewhere on Merawah, further detailed study was undertaken on the relict shorelines identified in previous surveys. Carried out by ADIAS Deputy Director Salvatore Garfi, and making considerable use of a refinement of survey methodologies made possible by our earlier work on Balghelam, (*see below*), the work located an extra-ordinarily large number of sites from the Late Islamic period, including settlement sites and stone rectangular hearths. Although research has not yet been completed on these features, it is possible that some may be of an earlier date.

Finally, the ADIAS team was pleased to be joined for a few days by Professor Graham Evans, formerly of Imperial College, London, who carried out the

first ever studies of Abu Dhabi's *sabkhas* (salt flats) in the early 1960s.

An acknowledged expert on the topic of *sabkha* formation, Professor Evans commenced a study of the *sabkhas* on Merawah and of the adjacent relict shorelines. This should eventually help us to understand the patterns of the evolution of the island's shorelines and, possibly, the changing sea levels over the last few thousand years, something that will be of enormous help in enabling us to understand the patterns of human settlement.

During the course of the Merawah field season, which lasted from early March until early April, samples of potsherds from the sites were collected, which will now be subjected to detailed study.

While no firm conclusions can be drawn in advance of the completion of the post-excavation studies, the season underlined that Merawah holds potentially one of the most important groups of sites yet identified on Abu Dhabi's offshore islands and, indeed, along the whole of the UAE coastline.

Further study is planned for future seasons.

ADIAS, as always, is grateful to our Patron for his support.

Valuable information from Balghelam work

A second season of investigations into Late Islamic archaeological sites on the island of Balghelam, north east of Abu Dhabi, in January and February yielded valuable new information about the way of life of the Emirate's ancient inhabitants, according to the Field Director of the work, Salvatore Garfi.

The three week season, in which Garfi was assisted by field archaeologist Jakub Czastka and environmental archaeologist Mark Beech, began in mid-January and ended a few days before the Eid.

During the work, undertaken with the kind permission of Balghelam's owner, Presidential Court Chamberlain HE Sheikh Surour bin Mohammed Al Nahyan, Garfi and his colleagues completed a detailed survey and mapping of archaeological sites on the island, and also carried out a test examination of a midden (ancient rubbish dump), which yielded substantial quantities of fish and turtle bones, providing evidence of the diet of the island's former inhabitants.

A controlled pick-up of pottery from archaeological sites on the island was also carried out. This will now be examined and dated. A provisional assessment suggests that the bulk of the material dates from the Late Islamic period, from the Sixteenth or Seventeenth Century onwards.

"This work represented a chance to carry out further

examination of archaeological sites from the Late Islamic period on Abu Dhabi's offshore islands," Garfi notes. "It provided us with the opportunity to refine a number of our field methodologies, first developed as part of our continuing work on the islands in the far West of Abu Dhabi."

"We will now examine the pottery and the bones and the other environmental material," he adds. "These, together with the distribution of the sites around the island, and the results from our first season in January 1996, when the series of wells and hearths were studied, will provide us with valuable information that will help us to understand the patterns of settlement and use of resources on the island."

"We are particularly grateful to Sheikh Surour for his continuing support for our research on Balghelam," Garfi says. "The results of our work on the island are adding substantially to our understanding of how people lived on Abu Dhabi's coast and islands over the course of the last few hundred years."

Among the archaeological sites that have been identified on Balghelam are groups of large hearths or fire-pits, middens of oysters and other shells, and a complex water collection system, as well as a number of Islamic graves.

Similar sites have been identified on a number of other offshore islands to the west of Abu Dhabi, including Merawah, Liffiyah, Yasat al Ulya, Yasat Sufla, Ghagha' and Kafai, indicating extensive use of the islands during the Late Islamic period.

Work on the other islands, however, has been confined to field surveys, although some of these, on Ghagha' and the Yasats, for example, have involved detailed computer-aided mapping of the sites identified.

The work on Balghelam, including the 1996 excavations and the latest phase of work, represents the first detailed examination of a complex of Late Islamic sites ever undertaken on the offshore islands of the Emirate.

In contrast to the more fertile coastal areas of the northern emirates, the Abu Dhabi coastline and islands appear to have been occupied in the past by populations which moved from place to place in search of available resources. These are likely to have included marine resources, such as fish, turtles and dugongs, the eggs and checks of breeding seabirds and turtles during the right season, and the use of vegetation after winter rains for grazing livestock.

Such a lifestyle has some parallels elsewhere in the world, but has never previously been studied in the Arabian Gulf, and the results of the Balghelam work, as well as related studies on other islands, such as those on Merawah will help to fill in that blank in the country's history.

Mantiqa As'sirra re-visited

Following completion of work on Merawah, a smaller team, headed by Sal Garfi, moved to the desert east of Medinat (Bida) Zayed for a preliminary examination of the site of Mantiqa As'sirra.

The key part of the site, first identified by the Co-ordinator and archaeologist Jakub Czastka in April 1994, appears to be the remains of a rectangular tower, associated with two enclosure walls. Pottery scattered around the site is typically Late Islamic, perhaps dating to the Seventeenth Century AD.

The Project's attention was first drawn to the site by HE Sheikh Mohammed bin Butti Al Hamed, Ruler's Representative in Abu Dhabi's Western Region and Chairman of the Abu Dhabi Municipality and Town Planning Department.

Hearing from a local resident, Rashid Atij Al Mansouri, of the presence of antiquities in the As'sirra area, Sheikh Mohammed asked the Project to investigate, leading to the discovery of the site.

Prior to its discovery, no fortified Late Islamic sites had been recorded anywhere in the largely desert area between the coast and the Liwa Oasis.

The decision to include Mantiqa As'sirra in this year's programme follows a request earlier in the winter from HE Sheikh Mohammed bin Butti that further studies should be undertaken of the site. The short April season commenced with a further examination of the general area, with the invaluable assistance and guidance of Rashid Al Mansouri, who was able to show the team further scatters of previously unrecorded Late Islamic pottery, perhaps indicative of seasonal camp sites.

This was followed by a full survey of the main structure and the removal of wind-blown sand and the digging of text trenches in order to examine the remains of the walls.

Subject to analysis of the results of this work, and of a study of samples of potsherds collected from the site, a decision will then be taken on whether to mount a full excavation season at a later date.

The Project is grateful to the Abu Dhabi National Hotels Company for its provision of accommodation at the Medinat Zayed rest-house, and to officials of the Diwan of HE Sheikh Mohammed bin Butti for their provision of other facilities.

Fish study continues

As readers of the *Occasional Newsletter* will recall, Mark Beech, a member of our team now preparing his doctoral thesis at Britain's University of York, is concentrating on analysing the environmental remains from our excavations, to try to obtain infor-

mation about the lifestyle of Abu Dhabi's ancient inhabitants, based upon what food they ate, what crops they grew and so on.

An important part of this study is the identification of fish bones, found in profusion, for example, at the settlement site on Dalma dated to 5,000 BC to 3,500 BC. Analysis of fish skeletons found at the site, one of the earliest settlements ever discovered in the Emirates, suggests that its inhabitants may not only have been eating fish, but also drying them, perhaps for bartering with visiting traders.

To identify fish bones from archaeological sites, of course, it is necessary to have modern comparative material in the form of a fish reference collection.

During February and March, Mark continued work on the preparation of such a reference collection of skeletons of fish currently to be found in the Gulf. Much of this work was carried out in Ras Al Khaimah, with the support of the local Department of Antiquities and Museums.

Thanks to Mark's work, ADIAS now has one of the largest reference collections of fish skeletons in the Arabian Gulf, something that will be of use not only to our work, but to other archaeologists working within the region.

During the period of Mark's doctoral studies, the collection is being temporarily housed at the University of York, both to facilitate his own studies and access by other European archaeologists. It will later return to Abu Dhabi.

ADIAS at Paris Fair

At the request of Minister of Information and Culture His Highness Sheikh Abdulla bin Zayed Al Nahyan, ADIAS has prepared a selection of exhibits and accompanying photographs and charts to be incorporated in the historical and heritage displays at the UAE Pavilion at this year's Foire International de Paris, which runs from late April until early May.

Items on display include Late Stone Age finds from the islands of Dalma, Ghagha' and Merawah, material from the pre-Islamic monastic settlement on Sir Bani Yas and other material from the Late Islamic period, covering some of the seven thousand years of Abu Dhabi archaeology now being investigated by ADIAS.

Preparation of the exhibits was undertaken by ADIAS Director Dr. Geoffrey King and Henriette Mar- en, while financial support was provided by the Ministry's Department of Exhibitions.

We are grateful to HH Sheikh Abdulla for his interest and support, and look forward to further collaboration in the future.